The
WindHover
Project

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Requests for information on The WindHover Project may be made to:

Dr. Jay Torres, 9704 South 20th Street, Bellevue, NE 68123
Genie: WindHover, CompuServe : 71405,672

From Headquarters

It's been a fairly good summer off from the Project for a lot of us. Yours truly spent some time on the islands of Hawaii for a vacation which was put off way too long. We even got coverage in Computer Shopper (Applying the Atari ,July 87) for our now widely used SuperRam Series! Hope your summer was as good.

Well, it's time to sit down and write another column on the state of affairs at Atari. Let's see what's happening now.

I thought at first to write about the new products which are appearing. Lots of ST related products have made the market but I see very few eight bit products appearing. Since many of our fellow user groups have written about those products already (to death it seems) I decided not to do that. Then I thought maybe mentioning the financial growth of Atari. Again, well covered. Perhaps then the eight bit line? Hmmmm....

After eight years of Atari experience, five of them as president of various user groups (SAMSON ACE, ND; Santa Maria/Lompoc ACE, CA; The Atari Federation, Vandenberg/Lompoc, CA; The WindHover Project, CA & NE) and three of them as a newsletter editor the time has come for a critical assessment of the state of the Atari world.

Whither Atari - Part II

It has now been a while since the takeover of Atari by Tramiel and company. In many respects it has been a stormy period with reorganization, personnel cutbacks and financial stock offerings. Why then, after all this has gone by with Atari being stable again, have I chosen this particular title for this article?

Like it or not the very people who have most made it possible for Atari to rise again are the very people who are now in danger of being cast out of paradise. Strong statement? Let's examine the following.

At the recent CES Neil Harris (remember him? Mr. No Emulator?) and Leonard Tramiel were heard to say the future of Atari rests solidly on the new ST and Atari PC lines. When asked specifically about the current eight bit line their reply was 'the eight bits had their day. Great machines to be sure, but obsolete now. Everyone knows the eight bits are dead. Within two years we'll be out of that line completely.

As many of you already know, the 3 1/2" 500k disk drive was abandoned in favor of a standard 360k drive which Atarians with ATR 8000s have used for years. The 80 column board took more than a year beyond its initial shipping date to finally appear and many of the other tidbits we were offered (hi-res monitor/drive combo, cp/m module, etc.) somehow didn't appear. Production of the 800XL stopped along with the 1050 drive, 850 interface, software development (remember software? you need it to use that box of plastic and silicon on your desk), and customer support (sorry, you have to help yourselves now).

Meanwhile, the eight bit line has been remodeled again into a (GASP) GAME MACHINE! Light pistol, joystick, optional keyboard (?) and disk drive are the newest incarnation of the old Atari VCS 2600. Some of you may remember the Atari keyboard for the 2600, it never got to market either.

The production of the XE series has been cut back drastically to edge people towards the new game machine which looks amazingly like the 65XE without its keyboard. The 130XE? Who knows? Few software developers even bother with writing above the 48K limit, let alone use the full 128K the machine possesses. Do you see what I'm getting at?

When Tramiel took over Atari all he had to work with was the eight bit line. He had an idea for a 16 bit system but he needed one thing to get it off the ground. Money! Now, I'm not about to begrudge the man for wanting to make a profit (after all, it IS his company). I can't help but observe, however, how the user community was duped so easily with broken promises about continued support and new products to ensure the continuance of the eight bits.

First came the loss of customer support. No more advice for new users on how to effectively use their systems. Tramiel's advice? Join, what else?, a users group. You get faster advice and a wealth of information along with lots of (guess what?) software.

Developers are openly encouraged to continue software development for the new ST but told not to waste their time on the eight bits. The little software made by Atari for the eight bits was put on dual density disks which was great if you had a 1050 disk drive. What? you still use the OLD 810 drive? What are you waiting for, go get a 1050 so you can run all that great new software! Tramiel still needs cash to finance the ST he came up with (don't forget the new Atari PC too guys).

Support for the Atari eight bits had fallen drastically. One magazine, Antic, still offers simplistic articles for beginners but for more advanced users it's useless (unless you want to buy something from their great (ha!) catalog). Analog is the only one which still has anything to offer, speaking of which at least Analog lets user groups put their programs on BBSs. Antic says not only no, but hell no! Want Antic programs?, you buy their rag. Come to think of it, if you subscribe to an Atari magazine, perhaps you should renew only one year at a time. After all, they may disappear suddenly like Timex-Sinclair and TI 9/44 owners discovered.

Newsletters put out by user groups are heading in a similar direction. I read dozens of newsletters from around the world each month and I see the same thing in all of them, ST this, ST that. Very little of the eight bit is mentioned. If this continues, eight bit members will leave in DROVES people! This is not a diatribe against the ST but let's face it. Why stay with an organization if it won't support you? This attitude I see reflected in newsletters shows how bad things have gotten.

As much as I hate to admit it, the beginning of the end for the eight-bit line is dawning upon us. With the drop in software support (sorry guys Electronic Arts won't continue Batteries Included software support), cutback in hardware production and the in-fighting I have observed in other user groups it's very difficult to get away from this feeling of dread which permeates the Atari eight bit user community. Sure, I have an ST and I won't get left behind by the Atari evolutionary process but that's besides the point.

I first learned to program on the Atari eight bit and have a lot of software for the machine. At the risk of sounding sentimental I really have a strong fondness for my old 800. I like the capabilities of my 130XE and I'd put them up against any other home computer anytime, even the ST. I don't like the idea of it becoming an orphan like the 000 or the Adam. There is still a lot of life in those two 'obsolete eight bit

machines' and with the amount of software I've bought and developed over the years I certainly won't go without.

Still, not everyone is as fortunate. There are a LOT of newbies out there with no where to go if the user groups continue on their present path. A lot of machines will be gathering dust in closets and with them a lot of broken promises and hope. A lesson should be taken from other computer owners who have suffered a similar fate. Fight back.

On my desk sits a Timex Sinclair 1000 and an IBM PC-XT (sorry Jack, I couldn't wait for your Atari PC with 512K, no expansion ports, no hard drive, no OS, no nothing).

I suppose the TS1000 would be a curiosity except for one thing, USER SUPPORT. The TS1000 (and the TI 99/4 for that matter) is no longer in production and yet, it won't die. It's a nice enough little machine but the point is it's not supported by anyone except the users and a few hardy companies which believed in its capabilities. The PC-XT is no longer being supported by Big Blue but again, user support makes sure of its continued existence.

These two machines have a lesson to offer to us Atarians if we but listen to the winds of change as they blow through the trees. A computer system, a GOOD computer system, need not fade away into extinction if there is one thing left USER SUPPORT.

At the present there are some 200-300 Atari user groups in the US and Canada. There exists no FORMAL affiliation of these groups into ONE voice which can speak for ALL of the users in our community. There is no FORMAL plan of action for the future of the Atari. There is no FORMAL network for the dissemination of information to everyone. The time has come for such actions to begin to ward off extinction for the eight bit line.

The WindHover Project is interested in forming a formal affiliation of The Atarian Federation with all other user groups for the purpose described above. Any and all user groups are urged to contact us if they are interested in this idea. Write to: Dr. Jay Torres, The WindHover Project / The Atarian Federation, 0704 South 20th Street, Bellevue, NE 68123 or drop a line on GENIE, ID WindHover.

The Atari PC - Clone or Clown?

With the entry of several PC clones into the IBM PC-compatible market, and the abandonment of the PC for the PS/2 by Big Blue, it's puzzling to understand why Atari, of all companies, should want to enter this market strewn with the battered ledger sheets of many failures. Yes, the company which has told it's users 'The Eight Bit is Dead!' has introduced another dead eight bit machine.

With the introduction of the Atari PC into the compatible market, the acknowledged 'game machine company' begins its attempt to win over corporate America and, along the way, more home computerists. It is an attempt I predict will end in another failure if, indeed, it is more than just vaporware.

The Atari PC, while offering some nice features, is one of the many stillbirths of the computer age.

To begin, 512K of RAM is used by the Atari PC. Compare this to 640K which comes standard with almost all other compatibles. This is not enough to run most of the popular

s ¸ware packages. Unfortunately, you cannot expand the RAM memory as you can with other compatibles.

Next is the on-board graphics compatibility of mono, Hercules, CGA and EGA graphics modes. While this is a nice feature to have, the new standard now includes IBMs VGA graphics mode. This makes the EGA standard look like a monochrome display.

Moving on, we find two double density, double sided 320k disk drives. That's nice except the standard is DD/DS 360K drives. A bit on the low side if you ask me. To top it off, there is no hard disk drive option provided on the Atari PC. Some applications demand a hard disk to operate.

Next, we come to hardware slots, or rather, a lack of hardware slots. All other compatibles offer additional slots conforming to the IBM standard to allow things like hard disk cards, extended/expanded memory cards to 4 MB, internal modems, etc. You can't do that with the Atari PC. Sigh. Tramiels' answer to this criticism was the announcement of an expansion box for the Atari PC. Heck, I'm still waiting for the CP/M emulator box for the Atari 800 and XL/XEs. Vaporware by any other name....

Finally we come to the main issue, IBM compatibility. While Atari has made this claim, it is not exactly true. For IBM compatibility you need two things: IBM compatible BIOS (Basic Input/Output System) ROMs and MS-DOS. The Atari PC does not contain the Phoenix BIOS ROMs which are acknowledged to be the only truly IBM compatible ROMs available. The BIOS was developed in Taiwan. While MS DOS programs will run on the Atari PC it will NOT run true IBM programs. Therefore the only claim Atari can truly make is ¸ of MS-DOS compatibility. This isn't so bad really since a lot of MS-DOS software ¸l run on the IBM anyway but at least let's clear the air.

Will the Atari PC meet a need for corporate America? Not likely. Maybe nobody ever got fired for buying IBM but would you risk your job on an Atari? I wouldn't. Will there be a place for the Atari PC in the home market? Probably. After all, Coleco found a place in a lot of closets for their Adam computer.

Tramiel has stated he wanted to do this because he knew there was money in the PC compatible market. There's something else there Jack savvy buyers who know what they want in the way of a compatible. I'm afraid the Atari PC will amount to little more then a warehouse of parts for you. After all, they are going to want something you don't like to provide - CUSTOMER SUPPORT AND SERVICE.

Antics' Copyright Policy (?)

The past couple of months has been extremely busy on the DBS with one pair of topics which are closely intertwined - copyrights and piracy.

We all know about piracy. It causes monetary loss to the software houses, loss of income to individual programmers, a bad reputation for microcomputer enthusiasts in general and yes, it's illegal.

I'm not about to get into a long drawn out debate about how software prices are too high and if software houses would lower their price it would go away. Come on, even ¸ ˜ic domain software and stuff like our SuperRam Series gets pirated by others, even ¸ ˜ groups and that's free! Let's not kid ourselves.

The real issue to be examined is copyright and the control of the distribution of materials into the real world. Enter Antic Magazine.

While many other computer magazines publish and encourage the distribution of their software by user groups and BBS systems, Antic has taken the stance that if you type in one of their programs and use it yourself, that's fine. If you GIVE a copy of it to another or put it on (oh no!) a BBS you, my friend, are nothing but a verminous PIRATE and deserve to die!

One BBS in particular operating out of Maine was contacted by Antic and ORDERED to remove all Antic programs from the BBS or the Sysop would be arrested. This was made public by Antic itself and the furor hasn't died down since.

Antic had never made it known that it maintained the copyright over ALL the materials whether it was submitted by the author as public domain or not. They sure let the authors know, however, that if Antic published their article Antic retained ALL rights to the material.

Hey, who wrote the stuff to begin with? The copyright LAW specifies the right of publication belongs to the author, not the publication, unless the author sells the copyright. Selling an article to a magazine is not the same as selling the copyright. Ask any attorney or better yet the copyright office in D.C.

When I subscribed to Antic Magazine I don't recall recieving it in a shrinkwrap cover with the statement "WARNING! This publication contains copyrighted material which, regardless of origin, is exclusively maintained by Antic Magazine. Distribution of this material to other then the end user will result in civil liabilities and prosecution of the offender to the fullest extent of the law. Opening this package means you agree with this policy".

If I had recieved something like that I would have made sure I got a license agreement at the very least and applied for a site license so my children could use the programs. Oh NO! If my kids use the Antic programs on MY disks without having a subscription of their own that must mean the Antic Copyright Protection SWAT team is on its way to my house right now and....

Silly, isn't it? Yet, the policy Antic has adopted is likewise stupid. Analog at least adopts the reasonable policy of allowing users to upload Analog programs to local BBS for the month of the issues publication. Analog apparently appreciates their readers more than does Antic and recognizes distribution of their published material foster goodwill for them as well as free advertisement of Analog magazine. This, in turn, leads to new subscribers.

Antic, however, continues on its merry way selling software though their catalog and admonishing its readership on "pirating" their software. In many cases, this has turned people against Antic Magazine. Why bother supporting someone who doen't at least make the effort to help out the entire Atari community? Not only can some people not subscribe to Antic, with this attitude more may not want to.

In the light of declining support for the Atari systems this would be a real shame. Bad enough Atari has turned its backs on its users, now those who we turn to for support

are doing the same.   Antic should remember they are not irreplacable.   If Antic won't do
good by their customers there are others who will.

Comm Link

As you may recall I used to call this column 'Sysop Sez' but with so many others
doing it I felt it was time to break out of the pack.   Rather than focus mainly on which
software or hardware files will be on the BBS I though it time to break tradition as well.
So, in the future I will focus instead on the current trends and available software in the
PC BBS world.

To start, if you have been active on Genie or CompuServe recently then you know about
the FCC's attempt to impose a STEEP access fee on the telecomputing community (that's you
and me).   Since the breakup of Ma Bell the FCC decided at first not to add additional
chqrges to packet-type networks such as Genie, CompuServe, etc. The FCC has now decided
to add a toll access fee to the charges you can expect from your favorite commercial
database.

What this will mean to us as users should be fairly evident.   Current charges of
$5.00/hr for Genie and $7.00 for CompuServe could easily go up to $10.00 nd $12.00
respectively if the $5.00 per hour access fee the FCC wants to bestow upon us should
happen to go through.   This will have a decided chilling effect on the home PC user
community.

Consider that these databases are used by people who have one thing in common,
anting to get the most out of their systems.   A lot of excellent public domain software
has been developed and placed on these systems for other users to access and enjoy.   The
low prices offered by these same services is what has made possible the current level of
telecommunications across this country.   Increase the price people have to pay and people
will find something else to spend their money on.   The result will be a decrease in what
little resouces some of us have for our systems.   Telecommunications is great but after
all we still have to eat.

Make your voice heard.   Send a letter to your representative and congressman.   Phone
your senator.   Write a letter to the FCC (believe it? The FCC doesn't have a BBS of their
own! Ah, intellect).   Hopefully we can stop the FCC from taking this action. Otherwise
all we may get on our R: channel is a quiet hum.

The WindHover Project
9704 South 20th Street
Bellevue, NE 68123

Genie: WindHover
CompuServe: 71405,672

San Leandro Computer Club
P.O. Box 1506
San Leandro, CA 94577-0374
ATTN: Newsletter Editor